

“Don’t” Doesn’t Work: An Introduction to Interaction

Marjorie D. Williams, M.Ed.

Have you ever wondered why when small children are told “don’t”, “stop” or “no” it seems to ignite something inside their brains that tells them “go ahead” or “continue what you’re doing?” Depending on the frequency or volume that parents use these words, children simply register these words and directions as an adult temper tantrum or momentary insanity. If you’re anything like me, sometimes it might be! In fact, my oldest son who is now in college (my youngest is eleven months) recently shared with me that he enjoyed watching my frustration level rise much like watching reality television or a car wreck. Often times his goal was to get a reaction out of Mom because it’s fun! He has always tormented Dad too, with a slightly different twist.

In reality, children are challenged when processing these words and directions because telling children “don’t, stop and no” leaves them with no immediate alternative of something else to do. Hence, a child’s reaction is typically to resume the activity or find an alternate “parent reaction behavior” with total disregard to any stern parental message. Those parents with multiple children, especially parents with a new baby and older children at home, may use the “don’t, stop, no” words as part of a regular vocabulary.

Just how often do we use the don’t-type words? Try going a day without saying these words to your children. That includes omitting the words “no”, “stop” or any word giving negative direction. Some parents have tried some pretty creative ways to get around it and many say it’s impossible. There are virtually no alternative ways of using these words. The alternative is simply the art of alternative thinking. The alternative is for children to be given choices and positive direction. Parents also need to be prepared with their ammunition and establishing a routine so children know what to expect. The art of mastering the task of redirection and alternatives will be even greater appreciated when children reach the teenage years!

Some expert’s say that it takes 30 days to incorporate new behavior into an adult’s regimen. For children, changing a pattern can be accomplished in as little as seven to 14 days with positive reinforcement and consistency.

- Step 1: Try not to react or overreact with your children – for some people this is a hard task ... but try it for 30 days.
- Step 2: Be prepared to give children alternatives to any behavior or action. Redirect their actions to another activity with a calm and confident voice. Children hear their parents reacting emotionally and may not feel the level of reassurance they need to change what they are doing. Children lose confidence in your words. When a child is involved in a house-endangering activity inside, try the activity outside with them or give them a couple of alternatives for fun things to do in the house. Avoid resorting to the television.
- Step 3: For many children, multiple alternatives can be more effective. Even in a disciplinary situation, giving children two choices can often help parents. My

three-year-old son decided one day that he was too old for naps. His alternatives were to rest in bed, read his book or listen to quiet music. When away from home, try to carry a small bag filled with alternative entertainment – items that children can use away from home. By having specific toys and books used only away from home, children have items that are fresh and not “played over.” If you have more than one child, bring items that are similar in nature or they may fight over them.

- Step 4: Try to remain patient and calm. Taking five or 10 minutes to be rational and attentive can save hours in a power struggle. You’ll feel better, I promise. This works especially in those situations at the grocery store when kids just really are unhappy about being there. Clear your mind of everything and give your undivided attention to the child ... no matter how much you want to get on with your task. Take time to give a hug, talk or ask what they need. Make plans for something after the dreaded activity ... or better yet, always give at least 10 minutes of undivided, fun attention before a dreaded activity or car ride.
- Step 5: Be Flexible. Choose your battles ... give children some leeway and save those stern moments for the really important battles ... again, this is a parent’s preparation for when your children are teenagers. Choices should not cost money ... bribery will not provide any long-term benefits.
- Step 6: These ideas are suitable for children from birth to five years ... and beyond. Remember, sometimes children just want you ... when they feel your undivided attention at important times of the day, it is the same feeling parents enjoy when their heads hit the pillow at the end of a long day ... immediately before you hear “can I have a drink?”

The more parents incorporate specific routines and choices into the daily lives of their children; the better a day will flow. We’re all creatures of habit and our children are no exception.